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Medical Practice Question

EDITOR'S NOTE: *From time to time medical practice questions from organizations with a legitimate interest in the information are referred to the Scientific Board by the Quality Care Review Commission of the California Medical Association. The opinions offered are based on training, experience and literature reviewed by specialists. These opinions are, however, informational only and should not be interpreted as directives, instructions or policy statements.*

Anticholinergic Drugs for Nicotine Addiction and Withdrawal

QUESTION:

Is it accepted medical practice to treat nicotine addiction and withdrawal with the use of anticholinergic drugs?

OPINION:

In the opinion of the Scientific Advisory Panels on General and Family Practice, Internal Medicine and Psychiatry, the use of anticholinergic drugs, such as scopolamine and atropine, to treat nicotine addiction and withdrawal is considered investigational. There is the theoretical possibility that, after acute physical withdrawal from tobacco is complete, the use of antagonists to nicotine might decrease craving for nicotine, but this hypothesis remains to be proved. The advisory panels are unaware of published studies supporting the use of anticholinergic drugs to treat nicotine withdrawal and questions regarding the safety, efficacy, side effects and complications of this method remain to be studied. There are reports in the literature that mecamylamine, another anticholinergic drug, has been shown to be effective in blocking the effects of nicotine withdrawal in experimental studies. However, in the absence of double-blind, randomized placebo-controlled clinical trials and given the possible toxicity of the pharmacological agents involved, the use of anticholinergic drugs to treat nicotine addiction and withdrawal cannot be considered accepted medical practice.